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LONDON FOR LORD, PARIS FOR NOBLES

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TAGS: KDEM SOCI PREL PTER PHUM

SUBJECT: SARG PROTESTS NEW TSA SCREENING REQUIREMENTS;
THREATENS SIMILAR MEASURES AGAINST AMERICANS

REF: DAMASCUS 28

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: MFA Chief of Protocol Abdullatif Dabbagh summoned CDA on January 12 to protest enhanced screening requirements recently instituted by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Since the announcement of the new measures, SARG officials, Syrian media, and ordinary Syrians have reacted strongly against them (reftel). Dabbagh registered the SARG's "strongest protest" against the "discriminatory" and "unjustified" new steps. Arguing that "not one Syrian has committed a terrorist attack for al-Qaeda," Dabbagh said he hoped the measures would not be a "drawback" when U.S.-Syrian relations are getting "better and better." He also requested the USG to reconsider Syria's inclusion on the list, and stated that if the new screening measures are implemented, the SARG will reciprocate with Americans upon arrival in Syria. END SUMMARY.

"THIS IS UNJUSTIFIED"

¶2. (C) MFA Chief of Protocol Abdullatif Dabbagh delivered a demarche to CDA on January 12 registering the SARG's protest of enhanced screening requirements for travelers from 14 countries, including Syria, recently instituted by the TSA. Opposition to the new requirements has been growing for days among SARG officials, in the Syrian media, and among ordinary citizens since the TSA's announcement (reftel). Dabbagh called the new measures "unjustified" and criticized them for "singling out" Syria and the other countries on the list.

¶3. (C) Dabbagh added the new measures run contrary to the Obama administration's declared policy of resolving differences through dialogue, and constituted "the continuation of a double standard" against Arab and Muslim travelers. He stressed that the new measures would not prevent terrorism, and declared "not a single Syrian citizen has committed a terrorist attack for al-Qaeda."

SIMILAR MEASURES MAY BE TAKEN AGAINST AMERICAN VISITORS

¶4. (C) The Chief of Protocol worried about the effect of the new requirements on U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations at time of increased U.S.-Syrian engagement. "We don't want this to be a drawback when things are getting better and better" between the U.S. and Syria, he said. Dabbagh requested the USG to reconsider naming Syria on the list of countries receiving enhanced screening. He stated that if the new requirements are implemented, the SARG will impose enhanced screening requirements on American citizens visiting Syria.

¶5. (C) CDA noted the new requirements did not just apply to Syrian citizens, but to all travelers, including Americans, coming to the U.S. from the 14 countries on the list. He also stressed Syrians, like visitors from around the world, remained welcome in the United States, and the screening requirements are meant to ensure the safety of Americans and

foreign visitors alike. CDA assured Dabbagh he would pass the SARG's message to Washington.

¶6. (C) Following the meeting, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) issued a press release entitled "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Summons American CDA to Notify Him of its Strong Protest Against Discriminatory American Measures." The press release stated "the Ministry expressed deep astonishment about the imposition of these measures, as the U.S. knows, better than anybody else, that no Syrian citizen is linked to the event that is cited to justify these measures." The release concluded by stating "Syria will find itself forced to take reciprocal steps if the American side persists in imposing these measures."

HUNTER